

Phoebe

Scripture Reference: Romans 16:1,2

Name Meaning: Pure or radiant as the moon

We know nothing of this pious female who delivered Paul's "inestimable packet"--The Epistle to the Romans--to Rome. We just have the brief mention of her name and service. Phoebe, a devout Christian, bore without change and without reproach the name of the Moon-Goddess of the Greeks. The goddess Artemis, known by the common epithet "Phoebe," was supposed to have been identified with the light of the moon. But the Phoebe whom Paul so highly commended shone as a light for Jesus, the "Light of the World." That she must have been a woman of some consequence appears from the fact that she planned a long journey to Rome on business of her own, and offered to convey to the saints there Paul's letter--"an inspired masterpiece of logic which struck the keynote of orthodoxy for the universal Church through all the succeeding ages." In some fifty words Paul gives us a beautiful cameo of this saintly servant of Christ for whom he urged the saints at Rome to do their utmost. The importance of her visit is indicated by the appeal of Paul to the Romans to "assist her in whatever matter she had need of." Phoebe was--

A Sister

As used by Paul, this designation implies a spiritual relationship. He calls the believing husband and wife, "the brother and the sister" (1 Corinthians 7:15; 9:5). Young Timothy was his "son in the faith." Phoebe, then, was a member of a spiritual family in which the relationship is based upon the redemption of Christ and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 4:4-7). Apart from natural relationships, no woman is my "sister" unless she shares my experience of God's saving grace through which alone we are made members of His redeemed family. How or when Phoebe became a Christian and a sister in the Lord, we are not told. What is evident is the manifestation of her sisterly love and labors among her sisters and brothers in Christ. "Our sister" is a term indicating her Christian status.

A Servant of the Church

Phoebe was not only a member of a spiritual family, but likewise a member of the visible church at Cenchrea when Paul arrived there on his third journey and from where he wrote Romans. Phoebe was not merely a confessing and active believer, she was also "a ministrant of the Church." The word for "servant" is *diakonos*, *from which we have "deacon" or "deaconess."* It is not certain whether such an official female Order as "Deaconess" was in vogue at that time. Phoebe, however, occupied such a position in the church, and as such could be a teacher of all female inquirers of the faith, and be active in the relief of the temporal needs of the poor among the flock. We can safely assume that Phoebe was one of the first, if not the first, of the noble band of deaconesses in the Christian Church. If hers was not an official ministry, it was certainly a most gracious and effective one, and she was indeed one of the forerunners of the vast army of women who have rendered such loyal service to Christ and His Church.

A Succourer of Many, and of Myself Also

The word Paul used for "succourer"--*prostatis* --is a most expressive one. It literally means "one who stands by in case of need." It is classical Greek describing a trainer in the Olympic games, who stood by the athletes to see that they were properly trained and not over-trained and rightly girded when they lined up for the signal. Moule translates the phrase, "She on her part has proved a stand-by (almost a champion, one who stands up for others) of many, aye, and of me among them." Phoebe was the unselfish, liberal helper or patroness of the saints, conspicuous for her works of charity and also hospitality. To quote Moule again—

She had been a devoted and it would seem particularly a brave friend of converts in trouble, and of Paul himself. Perhaps in the course of her visits to the desolate she had fought difficult battles of protest, where she found harshness and oppression. Perhaps she had pleaded the forgotten cause of the poor, with a woman's courage, before some neglectful richer "brother."

As for the personal touch "a succourer ... of myself also," it has been suggested that Paul had in mind the visit he paid to Cenchrea and, shaving his head took a Jewish vow (Acts 18:18). "The vow seems to point to a deliverance from danger to sickness in which Phoebe may have attended him." Because of her saintliness and practical works, Paul urged the believers in Rome to "receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints."